

# EARLY MINERS of the FORTYMILE



A BLM 'Adventures in the Past' Series



Produced by the  
Bureau of Land Management



## WANT TO KNOW MORE?



### Front Cover

Organizations such as the Yukon Order of Pioneers (YOOP) and the Miners' Association were formed to provide social interaction and support for the miners, and to help settle any disputes that might arise.

Photo courtesy of the Ralph Mackay Collection,  
70-58-438N Archives,  
University of Alaska Fairbanks

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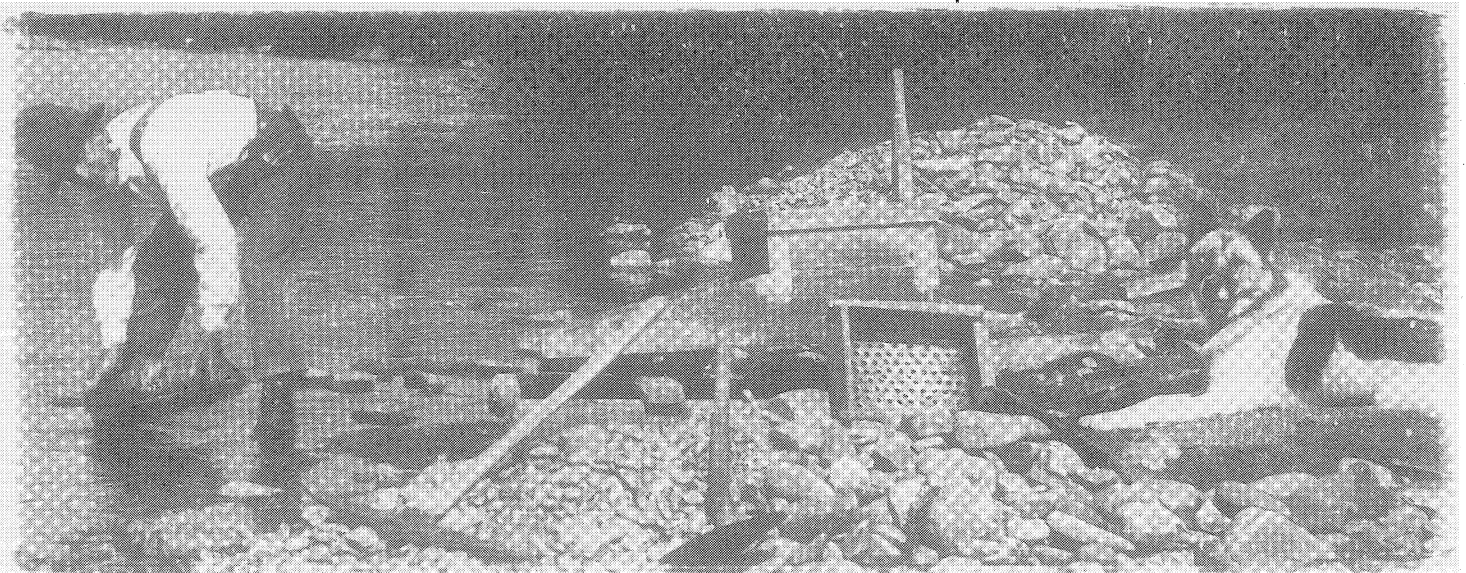


Spring! and the hillsides flourished vivid in Jeweled green.  
Spring! and our heart's blood nourished envy and hatred and spleen.  
Little we cared for the Spring-Birth; much we cared to get on.  
Stake in the Great White Channel, stake ere the best be gone.

Robert Service, *The Trail of Ninety-Eight* from *Best Tales of the Yukon*

Imagine yourself stooped over a clear, cold creek. The sun beats warmly on your back while your toes go numb from the icy waters seeping through the cracks in your boots. Birds chatter in the nearby aspen branches but their songs are lost in the constant whine of mosquitoes. You slowly straighten to ease the cramping in your shoulders, back and legs to find a moose and her calf have joined you at the river's edge.

But you take little notice of either the pain or the pleasure of the Alaska wilds. All your thoughts are focused just beyond the bone-chilling water swirling at your feet to what may lie beneath its gravely depths. You have a consuming and oftentimes incurable disease—Gold Fever!



Thousands of hopeful miners left behind everything familiar to them and endured unspeakable hardships because they were gripped by this disease. A select few triumphed in their search for gold, while more than a few died in their pursuits. Thousands of others left the Fortymile penniless and disheartened. And a few stayed because they'd grown to love and respect the land that had become their home.

Long days spent toiling  
under the midnight sun.

Photo courtesy of the Mike Erceg  
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## THE FIRST STRIKE



The Northern Commercial Company and the Alaska Commercial Company were two of the first businesses in the Fortymile region. They made a profit from the thousands of miners who flooded into the region, and blazed the trail for future businesses.

Photo courtesy of W.F. Erskine Collection,  
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**G**old! In 1886, Howard Franklin and his partners discovered a rich gold deposit on Franklin's Bar on the Fortymile River. News of the strike spread like wild fire and the rush to the Fortymile was on!

Miners weren't the only ones looking to profit from the region's gold. Leroy McQuesten, Arthur Harper and Alfred Mayo had been in the Fortymile region since 1873, and established trading posts where local Athabaskan Indians could exchange furs for an assortment of goods. They married into Native families, and were well liked and well established in the region. At the time of Franklin's strike they were prepared to capitalize on the flood of ill-equipped gold seekers they knew would soon be arriving. In fact, it was a letter from Harper to McQuesten (who was in San Francisco), alerting him to ship more supplies, that carried the news of Franklin's discovery to the outside world and launched the ensuing Fortymile gold rush.



Harper set up a trading post for the Alaska Commercial Company at the confluence of the Yukon and Fortymile rivers, and the town of Fortymile sprang up almost overnight. Fed by a constant flow of miners, Fortymile soon grew into a sophisticated community complete with a theater, cigar factory, dress shop and numerous saloons.

Within a few short years the Fortymile region boasted a population of over a thousand miners. More mining communities, such as Chicken, Franklin, Steele Creek and Jack Wade, appeared on the landscape.





After stopping at the community of Fortymile, miners followed trails to different rivers and creeks in the area. The routes most traveled included the trail leading from Eagle to the Middle Fork of the Fortymile River; the Eagle to Chicken Trail; the Dawson to Chicken Trail; and the Eagle to Valdez Trail. In winter, frozen rivers and creeks became convenient highways for the miners and trappers who would travel by foot, snowshoe, dogsled and horse-drawn sleds.

Traveling was rarely easy, and miners were often at the mercy of Mother Nature. During the 1890s Josiah Spurr poled up the Fortymile River and recalled the incident as, "a laborious process and one calculated to ruin the most angelic disposition."



One example of the frequent risks involved with remote travel was demonstrated by a trip Billy Meldrum, a resident of Chicken, and Mr. and Mrs. George Matlock made down the Yukon River.

Meldrum, traveling behind the Matlocks, began taking on water and was forced to stop and repair his boat. The Matlocks, who were using the river's current to propel them, were unable to stop and help. Left alone, Meldrum made his repairs and continued his journey down the Yukon with only moonlight to guide his way. To add to his troubles, the Yukon had begun to fill with ice, making travel even more perilous. Meldrum finally drew near his destination, relieved and grateful to find a fellow miner standing hip-deep in the cold water, waiting to assist in his safe arrival.

## Poling boats bound for mining claims up the Fortymile River.

Photo courtesy of the Charles Bunnell Collection, 58-1026-1478N, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks



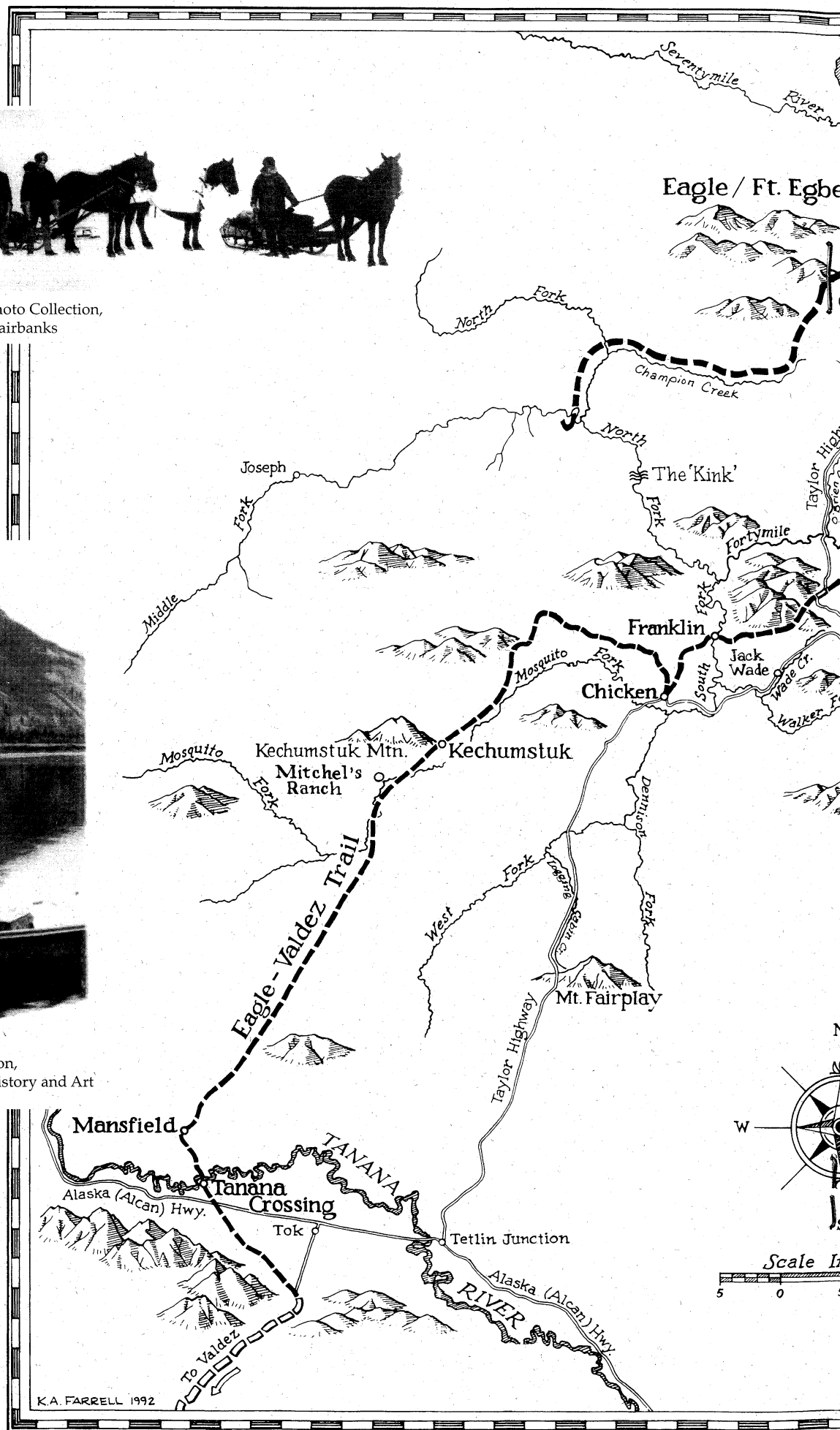




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Photo courtesy of the Stout Collection, Archives, Anchorage Museum of History and Art



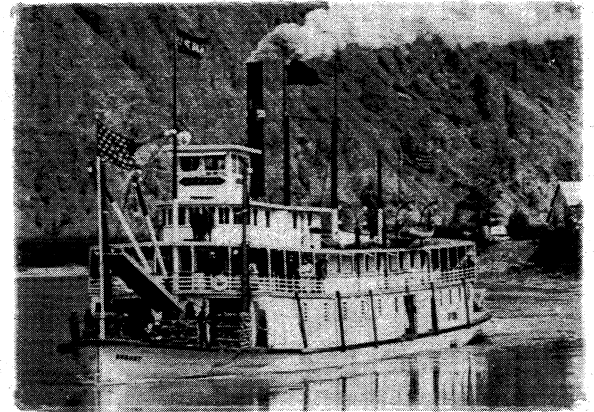
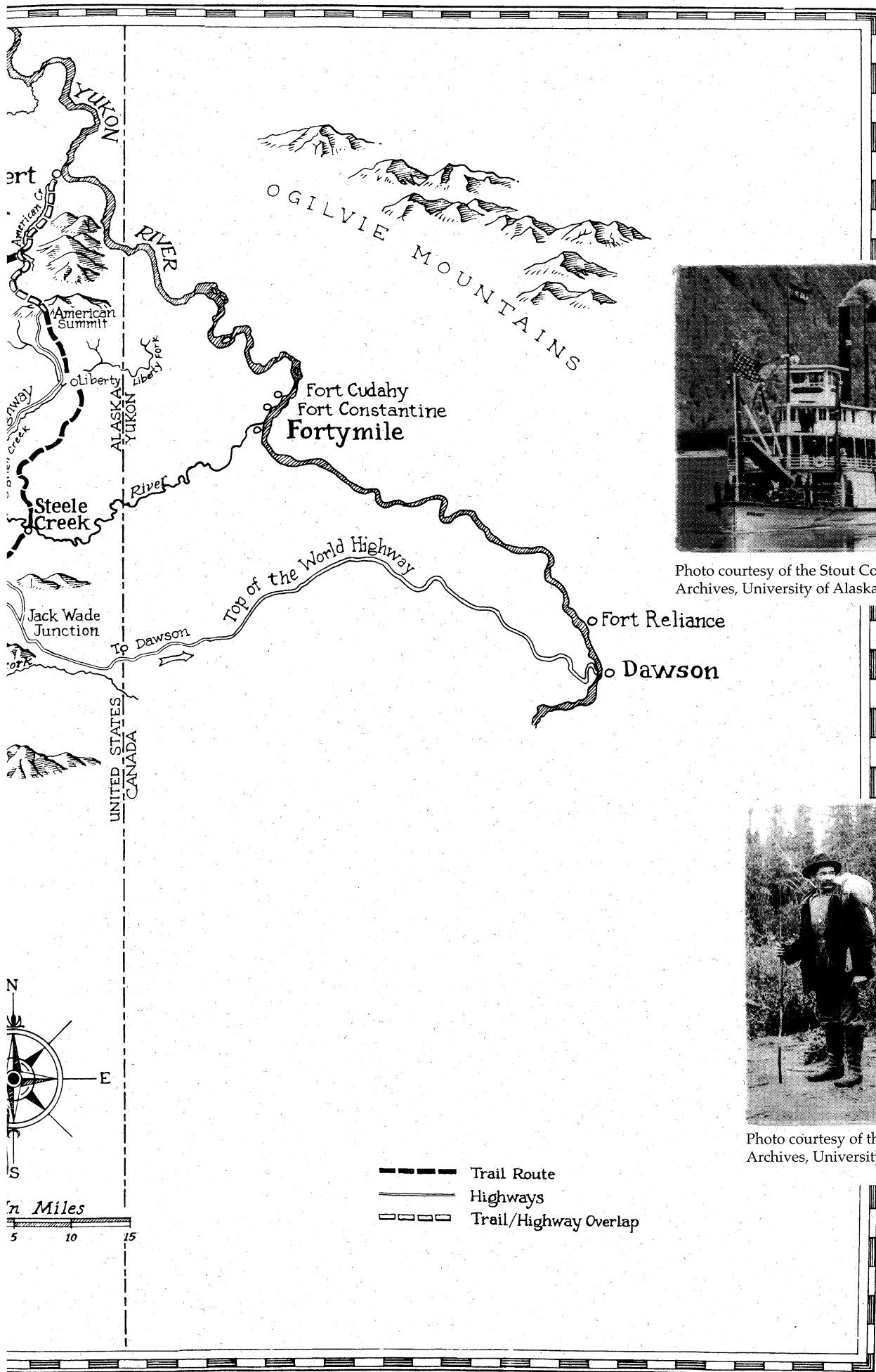


Photo courtesy of the Stout Collection  
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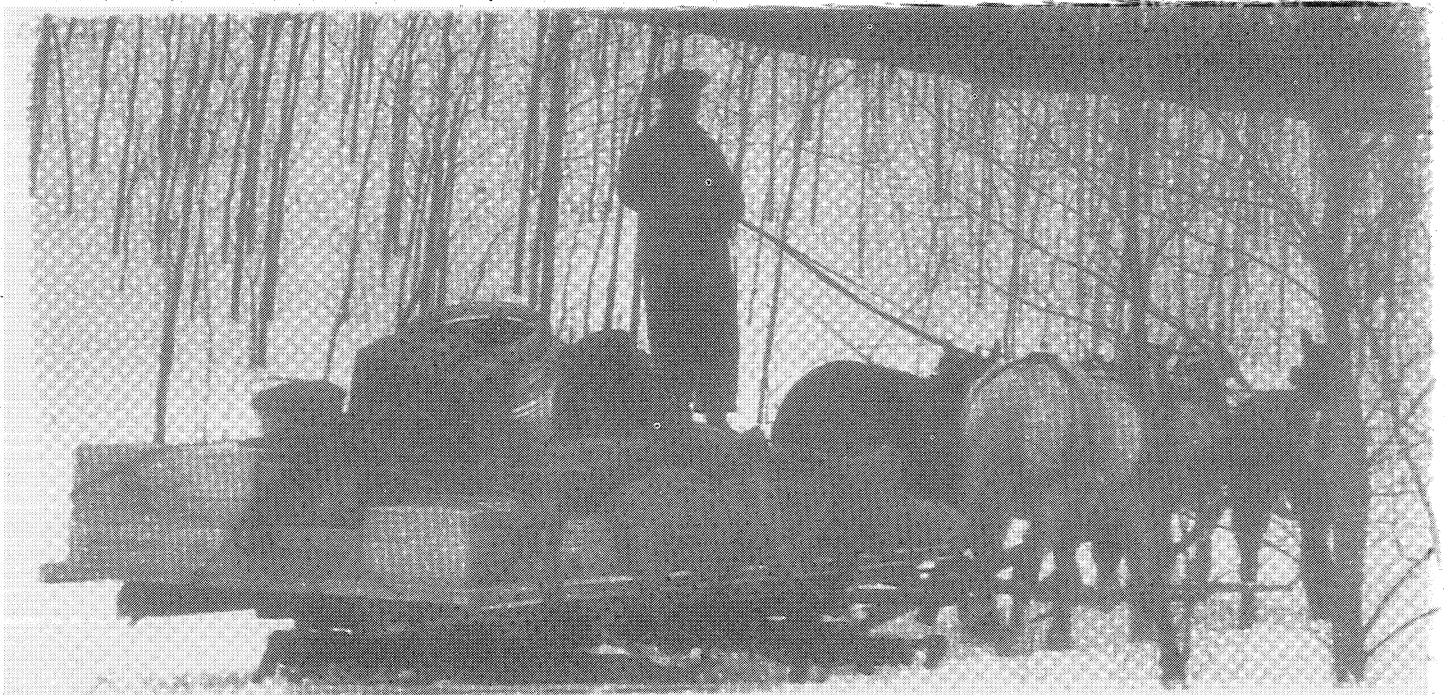
Photo courtesy of the Bunnell Collection,  
Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks



## FREIGHTING IN THE FORTYMILE

Until the Taylor Highway was built, there were no established roads into the Fortymile region. Miners living in the area had to rely on other modes of transportation when replenishing their food and tool supplies. In summer, sternwheelers could carry passengers and supplies as far as the communities of Fortymile and Eagle, but from there the miners had to make their way in poling boats or skiffs, or travel by foot with all their gear on their backs.

Many of the miners who came into the Fortymile were inexperienced and ill-equipped for the long journey. Some found it easier to hire others to carry their gear and grubstakes, which gave rise to freighting enterprises. One of the most prominent freighters in the history of the Fortymile area was John Powers, who used horses to transport miners' belongings to their claims.



During more than 30 years in the freighting business, Powers handled over 90 percent of the supplies that came into the Fortymile region.

Photo courtesy of U.S. Geological Survey and Eagle Historical Society

### FREIGHTING COSTS

TYPE	WEIGHT CARRIED	MILES/DAY	COST/TON
foot	50 lbs. per man	12	\$25.00
horse	200 lbs. per horse	12	\$12.00
dogsled	100 lbs. per dog	5	\$2.50
poling boat	1,000 lbs. per boat	20	\$1.50
sternwheeler	500 tons	250	\$.05





**E**arly miners needed to bring all of their equipment into the Fortymile themselves, or freight it in at a substantial cost. For these reasons most miners constructed what they needed with materials at hand after reaching their claim sites.

Gold-bearing sands and gravel often lay beneath considerable amounts of topsoil or riverbottom. The miners devised ingenious means to unearth this material, and then shoveled it into a sluice box where running water would wash the lighter sand and gravel away from the heavier gold.

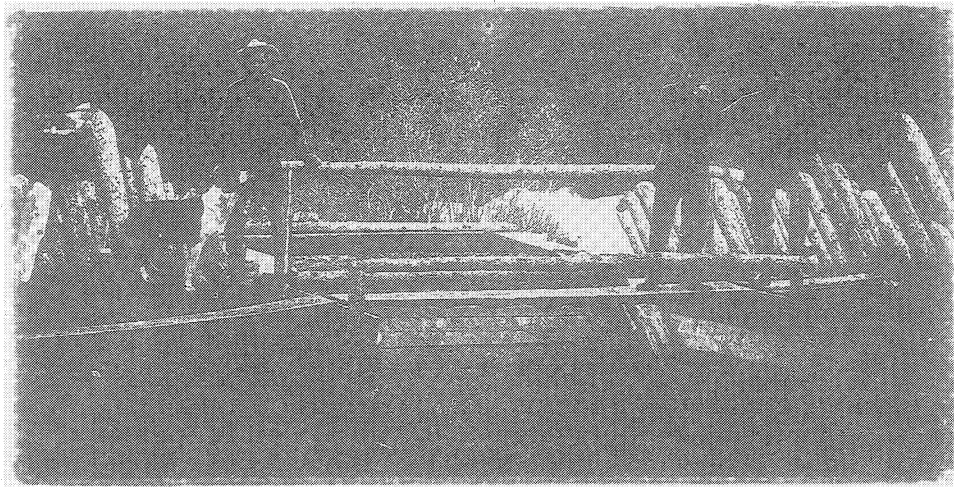


Photo courtesy of Poul Nelleberg



## MINING THE CREEKS

One method for reaching gold-bearing gravel was to build a dam across a creek. The dam was fitted with a swinging or pivoting gate on top. When the water level reached a certain height, the gate would open and water would spill down the dry creek bed. The water washed away the useless top material, leaving the gold-bearing gravels beneath. These were then shoveled up and run through a sluice box.



## DRIFT MINING

Drift mining was a year-round operation. In the dark and cold of winter, miners would excavate a shaft down to gold-bearing gravel and then 'drift' tunnels in different directions. Fires were kept burning for 8 to 10 hours to thaw the frozen ground into a melted muck that was hauled up the shaft one bucket at a time.

The material was heaped in a mound until the following spring when it could be run through a sluice box. Unstable gravel made drift mining very dangerous and miners were frequently trapped or killed by cave-ins.

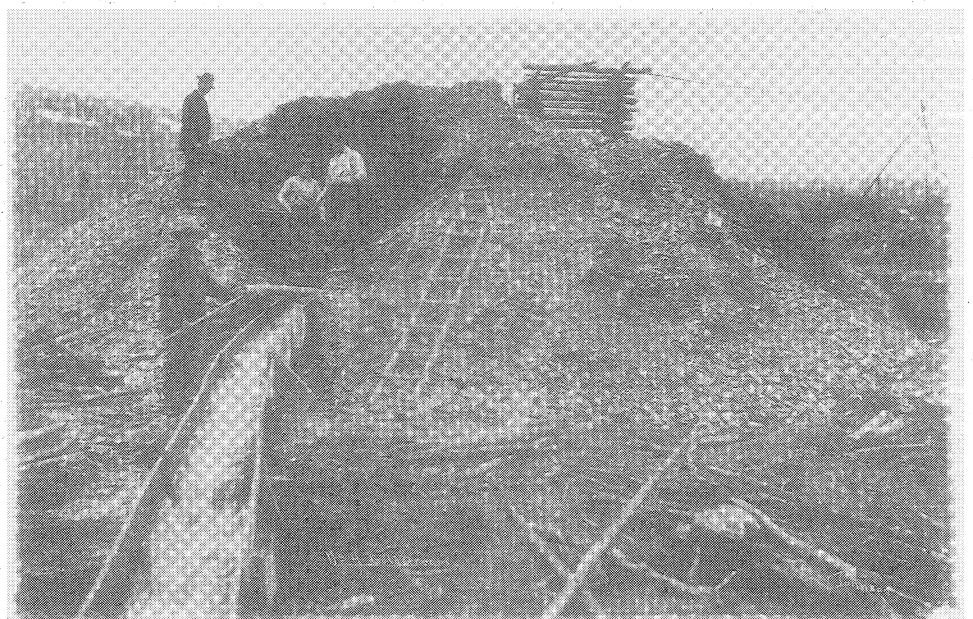


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## GEORGE MATLOCK

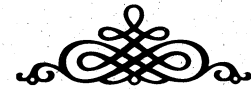


Photo courtesy of the Ralph Mackay Collection, 70-58-438N, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks

George Matlock was born in Iowa in 1861. He later moved to Wyoming but was forced to leave after an alleged shooting incident. He then migrated to the Fortymile region. Matlock was one of the original miners to hear about Howard Franklin's gold strike in 1886, and lost no time in checking out the claims. Along with three other miners, Matlock staked a claim along the South Fork of the Fortymile. They discovered a rich paystreak, but failed to mark the spot sufficiently and could not find the claim the following spring.

Matlock and his companions survived the winter months eating moose meat and broth. Although monotonous, the meal was nourishing enough to keep the men healthy and ward off scurvy, a disease that plagued early miners who had limited rations of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Matlock, a member of the Yukon Order of Pioneers, eventually settled down and married Jessica Mathers, a resident of Eagle, in the 1900s. He continued to mine along creeks and rivers in the area, and was still looking for his lost paystreak when he died in 1933.



## JOHANNES PETERSEN

Johannes Peterson was born on March 29, 1872, in Horne, Denmark. In 1898, Johannes and his brother Emil set out to find gold along the North Fork of the Fortymile River. They established their camp where a steeply protruding rock ridge created a very tight loop in the river, now known as The Kink. Johannes was certain that the riverbed under this loop held a lot of gold. He believed if he could blast a channel through the ridge that the river would flow directly through the cut, leaving the loop of riverbed exposed. He and his partners would mine this newly exposed gravel and become rich.

The men started work on the cut in 1898. They were forced to leave in 1899 when they ran out of money. After a season spent collecting more funds, Johannes returned in 1900 and continued laboring on the cut. In October, he and his partners finally broke through the ridge and the full flow of the Fortymile rushed through the new cut.

The men began mining the now-dry river bed. Johannes returned the following year with financial support from an Englishman named Bauer. While their mining venture was reasonably successful, Johannes tired of the mining lifestyle, sold his claim and moved on.



Photo Courtesy of Poul Nelleberg



Residents of early mining camps were surprisingly resourceful when thinking up ways to entertain themselves during the long winter. Visitors were always welcome, as they brought a change of pace to the monotonous routine of the miners' lives. Visitors also brought with them valuable news of the outside world. Food and shelter for the evening was often traded for military, political and international news.

Unfortunately, inclement weather cut the miners off from the outside world for months at a time. Most miners were accustomed to the inconvenience. With a sense of humor and an air of acceptance, they coped with the isolation. Aside from the usual card games and visiting, some mining camps had libraries filled with literary legends such as Hobbes and Shakespeare. One camp enjoyed the English Bard so much the miners formed a *Shakespeare Club*. Each member would select a part in a Shakespearean play and the miners would perform a "readers' theater."



Photo courtesy of Poul Nelleberg



"We 'ave very genteel amusements. As for readin' an' litrachure an' all that, why, dammit, when the first grub comes in the spring, we 'ave a meetin' an' we call all the boys together an' we app'int a chairman an' then someone reads from the directions on the baking powder boxes."

Early miner's conversation as relayed by Josiah Spurr, 1890s.



## A CHAPTER CLOSES

The beginning of the end of the Fortymile Gold Rush came in August of 1896 when 'Lying George' Washington Carmack reported the first gold strike in the Klondike. At first no one believed him. But as more and more reports of the rich strikes to the east reached the Fortymile, many miners left to seek their fortune in the new gold fields. Within a few years the once-booming towns in the Fortymile region were abandoned and forgotten.

Some of the original Fortymile miners returned to the area after the Klondike Gold Rush passed. From 1887-1890 the Upper Yukon region was the richest and most productive mining area in the region. During those three years the area produced 1,300,000 ounces of gold, accounting for 5 percent of Alaska's total gold production.

Others recovered from their bout of 'gold fever' and attempted to return to their lives in other parts of the country. Some, however, discovered they had contracted a new and unexpected fever—love for the Fortymile. They returned, trapping and hunting to supplement their incomes from mining. Soon small, close-knit communities dotted the wilderness. A few of these communities remain and are home to modern miners who embody the spirit of those who first arrived a century ago.



"I am at peace with all the world and am undisturbed by the sound from living mortals in my quiet home. I am simply supplied with every necessary comfort and have six grouse besides, yes, a basketful of eels. My health is perfect, not a pain or an ache or woe. I eat like a wolf, sleep like a babe and work like a tiger from dawn until dusk. My evenings are spent 'if at leisure' in either reading David Copperfield or else writing... The world is beautiful and Providence has my heartfelt thanks."

George Pilcher,  
'unsuccessful' miner, 1899

